

Net Neutrality is critical to preserving Democracy

One of the single greatest *losses* in the 20th century was the loss of prominence of the pamphleteer -- citizens who would write articles, missives, what-have-you about issues that concerned them, and circulated those opinions to other citizens in an attempt to convince them of the rightness of those views.

This was an important part of our history and of the formation of our country -- many of the Founding Fathers were pamphleteers (and the Federalist Papers are some of the most famous examples of pamphleteering) and their activities in this sphere were responsible for the very formation of our country. The freedom of the press, as it was conceived in those earlier days, went far beyond the publication of newspapers -- it also included the freedom for anyone to print and publish their opinions. Very few of the founding fathers were reporters, but they used the medium of publishing to make it possible for their opinions to be known to others.

Over time this practice became more difficult to accomplish. Towns grew, making the use of the "public commons" difficult and impractical. Zoning and other local ordinances actually make it *illegal*, these days, for someone to just show up in a public place and deliver a speech about something that concerns them -- not without acquiring the necessary permits and licenses first. Publishing, be it paper publishing, or broadcasting over the radio or the television, is exorbitantly expensive for the common man and has become the purview of political and corporate organizations who have the funding to do it. For a long time the last refuge of the pamphleteer was the editorial pages of the newspaper, which contained a limited amount of space for anyone who wished to communicate. For the last half of the 20th century anyone who tried to continue the tradition of the pamphleteer was considered at least a little bit crazy, or a political radical, and potentially dangerous.

The advent of personal computers in the 70s began to change this -- instead of investing in tens of thousands of dollars of publishing equipment it became possible to buy a computer and software that did much, though not all, of what professional publishing studios could do themselves. Suddenly the average citizen had access to tools that allowed them to communicate with much of the same sophistication that more professional organizations did... and with the advent of the internet, and more specifically the World Wide Web, it suddenly became possible for other people to access these publications in a cheap and inexpensive manner.

It was no longer necessary for someone to have the financial resources that a political action committee or corporation had -- with a modest income it was possible to publish content, and for other people to access that content. And because of that, and because of some specific technologies (like "blogging" software) there is now a standard in place that allows people to become engaged in political issues, social issues, or simply issues that interest them.

This has been, in other words, the rebirth of the pamphleteer.

This is not an event that occurred without controversy or protest. Certainly it has coincided with other events that are considered undesirable and disturbing, such as the presence of child pornography, the use of phishing to steal personal information from citizens, and the presence of computer and music piracy. But it has also allowed citizens to communicate with each other on a level heretofore unknown. It is now possible (even though it is not easy) for someone to publish an opinion that can be read and discussed all over the nation, in all fifty states. People in California and Louisiana and New York and Tennessee can meet on discussion forums and talk about issues common to all of them.

And right now everyone has an equal shot at being heard. It is not guaranteed that someone's ideas will be heard, noticed, discussed by everyone, but everyone starts out with the same chance. This would not be true if the internet were "tiered" in a way that favored large internet providers and gave their content more preference and access over people who were self-publishing. If the tiered access plans were enacted we would once again find that the corporations and other groups with the finances to afford the highest levels of access would dominate this new publishing media, and the rest of us would once again be relegated to the editorial pages.

I won't pretend that I am an impartial observer with no personal stake in the outcome of this -- I am deeply involved in using the internet to publish my own views and an enthusiastic supporter of using this medium to communicate effectively. But I hope this bias will not be taken the wrong way -- in fact, I hope this will not be seen as bias at all, but as an example of how the internet -- a neutral internet, not tiered, but open to all and equally accessible by all -- has allowed one citizen to become involved in something that he had not previously had the financial wherewithal to participate in.

I can't stress enough how important I feel that as citizens we need something that we can all access equally -- a large, abstracted common grounds, if you like. Even now this is not perfect, since today not everyone has the same quality of access (some have high speed internet, others have common dialup, still others have no access at all), but it is a more perfect solution than the tiered access proposals that some large internet access providers are lobbying for.

I hope that you will protect the new public commons, and preserve it for those of us who do not own media publishing empires, or who do not run political action committees, or who are not running for public office, but are instead citizens of the Republic who want our opinions and concerns to be heard by other citizens. Please protect this medium and keep it open to all who wish to use it. Thank you for your time and consideration.